

# Striving for balance where rural and urban meet

The Laboratory is located where urban Livermore meets the open space of the Altamont hills. For many species of wildlife, this transition zone between urban and rural is a suitable place to live. Even rare species, including the white-tailed kite and California red-legged frog, are able to survive and reproduce here.

Most Lab employees will never see these rare species at work, but there are many wildlife species that are frequently observed on site including the California ground squirrel, gray fox, striped skunk, pacific tree frog, great egret, red-tailed hawk and common barn owl. Although most of us enjoy being able to look out our office windows and watch a gray fox sneak between hedge rows or see a Cooper's hawk swoop down in pursuit of its next meal, we need to be aware that conflicts often arise in areas where humans live or work in close contact with wildlife.

The Canada goose exemplifies this conflict between people and wildlife. Cities throughout the country have inadvertently created ideal habitats for Canada geese by installing expansive lawns near ponds at parks and golf courses. While many people enjoy having geese and ducks in their towns and cities, flocks of Canada geese have grown to such large numbers in many areas that they are considered a threat and nuisance to people. We had a small taste of these conflicting feelings toward wildlife last spring when one family of Canada geese built a nest on the second story balcony of Bldg. 543. After watching the geese sit on their nest for several weeks and seeing the young goslings just hours after they hatched, many of the residents of Bldg. 543 were in love with the goose family. As the geese grew and spent time foraging throughout the Lab, many people were frustrated by the amount of mess one family of geese could leave behind and some people were frightened by the wild geese when they encountered them on walkways and near the entrances to their buildings.

Gray foxes are also common at the Livermore site. They often live in the crawl spaces under trailers and are frequently seen running out of culverts that cross under roads. Even when living in close



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proximity to people, these animals are naturally shy of people and quickly run for cover when humans approach. Although this tiny elusive fox will avoid people whenever possible, foxes can become aggressive if trapped or threatened.

There are two simple things we can do as Lab employees to reduce the number of problem wildlife/human encounters at the Lab:

- enjoy our wildlife from a distance



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California ground squirrels (*Spermophilus beecheyi*) above, are common in the north and west buffer zones of the Laboratory. A family of Canada geese (*Branta Canadensis*), right, often roamed near the old central cafeteria last spring.

- never feed a wild animal.

Wild animals that are fed by people can lose their natural fear of humans leading to aggressive behavior, and animals that become aggressive toward or fearless of people must be euthanized. In addition, "people food" is often not healthy for wild animals, and feeding wild animals can cause their population numbers to grow to unnaturally high levels. Feeding wildlife can also inadvertently lead to an increase in populations of pest animals because food left out for wildlife is often consumed by animals such as rats and feral cats.

Birds and wildlife do occasionally behave aggressively toward people, especially when protecting nests or young. If you encounter a wild animal at the Livermore site, step back and observe it from a distance. If the animal acts in an unusual way, contact a wildlife biologist by phoning 4-WILD. (See the Jan. 30, 2004 issue of *Newsline* for a detailed discussion of mountain lions in urban areas.)

The most worthwhile and rewarding wildlife observations occur when people are able to sneak a glimpse of an animal's natural behavior. What a treat to be able to see a white-tailed kite bring a meal to its nest or a mother gray fox sneak her pups across a walkway, or hear the call of an Anna's hummingbird or the chorus of Pacific tree frogs all during a lunch break. Please remember to enjoy wildlife from a distance and never feed a wild animal.



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